
BARBARA
ROMAIN
1948–2024 • Artist • Los Angeles

BARBARA ROMAIN

Barbara Romain spent a lifetime refusing the terms she was given.

A painter was not required to stay inside painting. A woman did not have to make anger palatable. A disabled artist did not have to make disability her subject. A slur could be seized and turned against itself. A page of racist propaganda could become material for an argument against hate. A mistake could remain in a painting because sometimes the accident knew more than the plan.

Across more than five decades, Romain moved between painting, performance, poetry, public art, education and collaboration without treating those disciplines as separate territories. She built paintings out of things that do not ordinarily stay still: music, language, memory, headlines, jokes, grief, politics, city streets, religious symbols and the accumulated noise of American life.

The connecting force was not a medium. It was a mind.

Romain was born and trained as a painter. Raised in West Philadelphia and educated at the Philadelphia College of Art, she moved to Los Angeles in 1972 and became part of a cultural world that crossed painting, jazz, poetry, experimental theater, feminist performance, education and public art. Los Angeles was not simply where she lived. Its collisions became part of the work.

In 1984, Romain was diagnosed with a retinal degenerative disease and was legally blind thereafter. The distinction she insisted upon matters: she was already a painter. Vision loss forced her to reinvent how she made art; it did not explain why she made it.

As sight became unreliable, other forms of perception assumed greater authority. She worked larger and closer. She intensified color. She developed original stencils for forms she could no longer reliably draw freehand. She painted from memory and drew to music. Language moved increasingly into the surface. She described creating Bad Eye on the Good Foot as a performance of gestures made while listening to James Brown. By 2001, she was exploring Braille "as a language element" in her work.

She called part of what emerged "visual music."

But the phrase described more than paintings inspired by songs. Romain understood painting as something that could unfold through time: rhythm against rhythm, color against language, improvisation against structure. Songs, headlines, junk mail, fortune cookies, literature, poetry and streams of consciousness became what she called "weavings of words." A viewer could enter the painting, lose the prescribed sentence and make another.

That instinct—to disturb the prescribed meaning—had appeared elsewhere in her practice.



Barbara Romain and Shelley Sachs performing *aka Ginger Sverlo*, 1991, in tampon costumes; archival photograph exhibited in *Vulvacular*, Ceres Gallery, New York, 2017. © Estate of Barbara Romain.

In 1991, Romain and Shelley Sachs wrote and performed the deliberately provocative Gray Pony production later known as aka Ginger Sverlo. Nude, comic, confrontational and feminist, the work took aim at the language used to discipline women, the body and the socially unacceptable. In her contemporaneous author's statement, Romain described its underlying idea plainly: taking something generally perceived as negative and turning it into "a source of pride." Contemporary KPFK coverage described the work as simultaneously angry, chaotic, frightening, loving, honest, gentle and celebratory.

The same impulse crossed into teaching and public practice. With Mira-Lani Bernard, Romain co-founded Art Options in 1992, working with young people whose intelligence conventional institutions had often underestimated. She taught at Columbia College Hollywood for thirty-two years. She made murals, installations and participatory works in schools, theaters, community spaces and on the streets of Los Angeles.

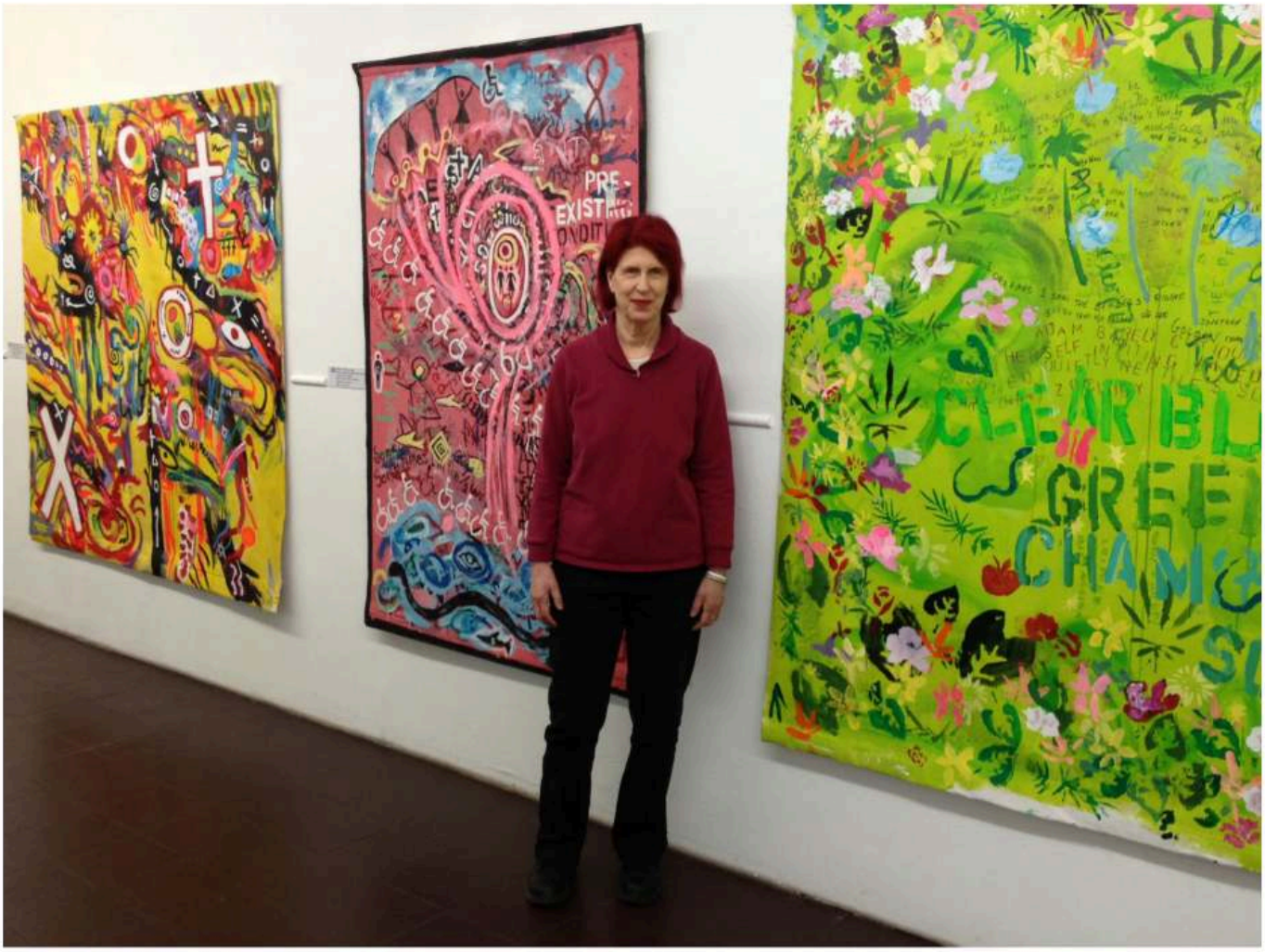
And when she was given the pages of white-supremacist books for Speaking Volumes: Transforming Hate, she did not hide the language. In Dialogue: Star, the original pages remained visible beneath another statement and a Star of David. Hate remained present as evidence, but it was denied the final word. The work joined an exhibition whose documented history would eventually extend across dozens of presentations.



Barbara Romain, *Dialogue: Peace*, installed in *Speaking Volumes: Transforming Hate*, Holter Museum of Art, Helena, Montana, 2008. © Estate of Barbara Romain.

By the time Romain traveled to Cologne in 2013 as the sole United States artist in Art Blind, the adaptations she had once developed privately had become part of a much larger investigation into perception itself. That same year, INTO THE LIGHT brought her long exploration of language and Braille to architectural scale in Chicago.

Romain resisted being reduced to a story of overcoming blindness because she understood that perseverance was not the work.



Barbara Romain at *Art Blind*, Cologne, 2013, with *Bad Eye on the Good Foot*, *God's Half-Witted Brother*, and *Garden of Eden*. Sole U.S. artist in the international exhibition. © Estate of Barbara Romain.

The work was the work.

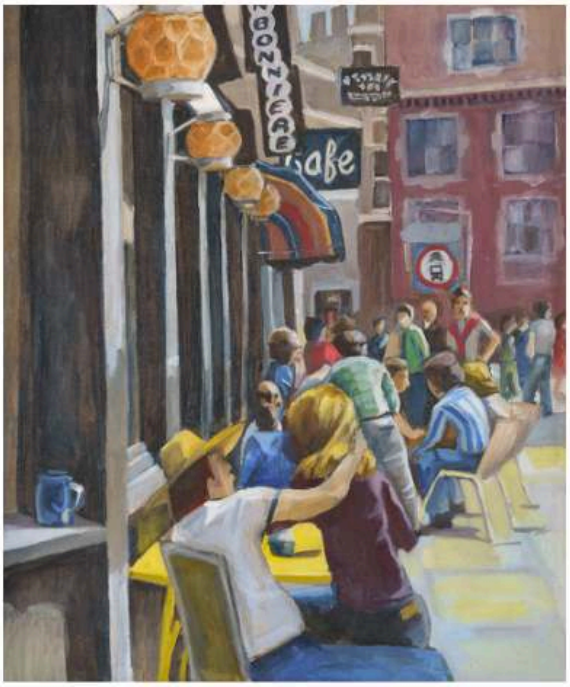
It could be funny, vulgar, devotional, political, erotic, grieving, musical, Jewish, urban, tender and furious—sometimes within the same canvas. She moved between the sacred and the ridiculous without accepting that one invalidated the other. She distrusted the boundary between high culture and popular culture, artist and teacher, painting and performance, beauty and ugliness, accident and intention.

Barbara Romain did not spend her career trying to resolve those contradictions.

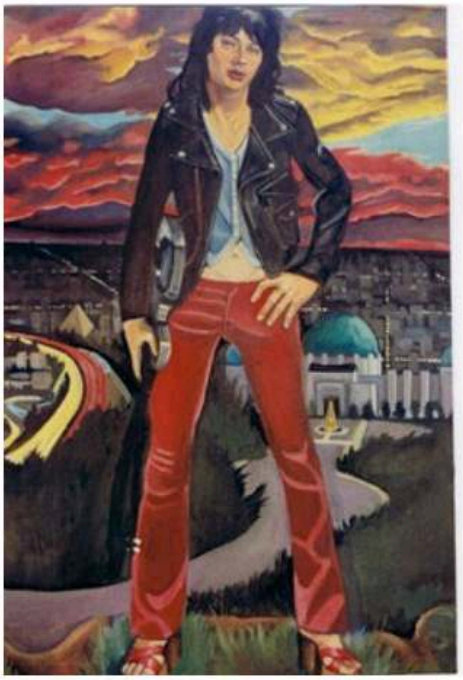
She made them work for her.

ACROSS THE WORK

Barbara Romain did not develop a single visual style and spend a lifetime refining it. Her work changed radically across decades—before and after vision loss, through shifts in perception, materials, language, music and subject. These eight works are not meant to summarize more than fifty years of making. They offer a glimpse of the distance she traveled.



Barbara Romain, Carnaby Street, 1976, oil on canvas, 23.5 x 19.5 in. © Estate of Barbara Romain



Barbara Romain, Gerhardt in Hollywood, 1974, oil on canvas, 50 x 34 in. © Estate of Barbara Romain



Barbara Romain, Madonna of the Freeway, N.D., acrylic on canvas, 20 x 16 in. © Estate of Barbara Romain

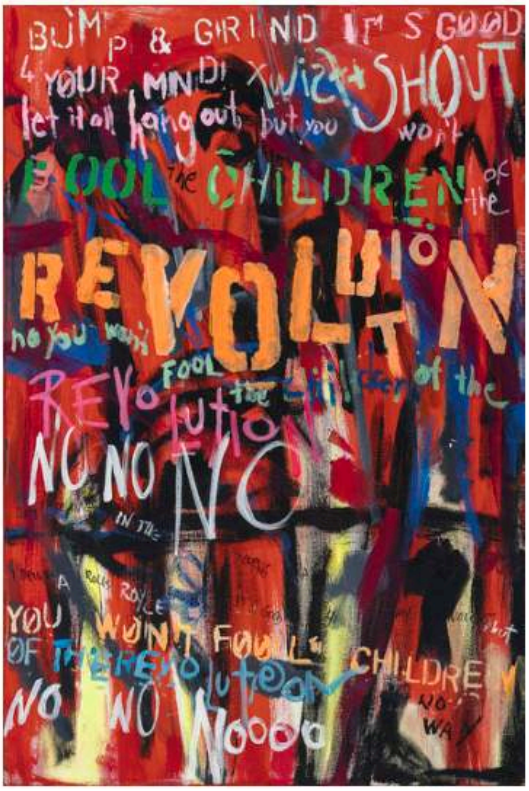


Barbara Romain, Confronting Orange, 1998 acrylic on canvas, 30 x 24 in. © Estate of Barbara Romain

The discontinuities are part of the record. What can initially look like several different artists is one artist repeatedly renegotiating what seeing—and therefore painting—could mean.



Barbara Romain, Mother Earth, 2011, acrylic on canvas, 36 x 24 in. © Estate of Barbara Romain



Barbara Romain, Children of the Revolution, 2005, acrylic on canvas, 36 x 24 in. © Estate of Barbara Romain



Barbara Romain, River Reverie, 2016, acrylic on canvas, 30 x 24 in. © Estate of Barbara Romain



Barbara Romain, Tweet, 2010, acrylic on canvas, 18 x 24 in. © Estate of Barbara Romain



Barbara Romain, Bad Eye on the Good Foot, 2016, acrylic on canvas, 72 x 72 in. © Estate of Barbara Romain



Barbara Romain, Purple Haze, 2016, acrylic on canvas, 72 x 72 in. © Estate of Barbara Romain

In later works, Barbara pushed the canvas to six feet and beyond. The scale was not incidental.

As her sight diminished, painting became increasingly physical. ***"Movements of my body replace the precision of my eyes as the vehicle for placing marks,"*** *she wrote. Her color moved in the opposite direction from her vision:* ***"My color palette has grown more vivid as my sight diminishes."***

At that size, a mark could become the sweep of an arm; music could become gesture. Bad Eye on the Good Foot was, in Barbara's words, ***"created as a performance of gestures in the process of listening to the music of James Brown."***

She described what was happening to her vision with characteristic bluntness: ***"The swiss cheese holes in my vision and limited depth perception and peripheral vision were transforming my visual world from a colorful banquet to a plain-wrapped fast food snack. I decided to focus on what was still possible."***

She did not try to recreate the visual world she was losing.

She rebuilt painting around what remained available to her—body, sound, memory, color, improvisation—and gave all of it more room.

BARBARA IN HER OWN WORDS

"Well first of all, being a woman certainly, that's a big aspect that comes out in my work. ***I have a very female sensibility in my work.*** *I think I'm urban… I'm Jewish, which I think culturally more than religiously manifests in my work. I'm a child of the 60s."*

"I create original stencils to incorporate symbols and icons of imagery which I can no longer draw free hand. Movements of my body replace the precision of my eyes as the vehicle for placing marks."

"Art is not about money, it's not about fame, it's not about success; although we all want those things but that can't be your reason to make it. You make it because you love to make it."

"My paintings explore this state of flux – accidental encounters of forms and colors within a structure of layered symbols and texts."

"The thrill of color upon color which I can see in varying degrees, drives layer upon layer."

"Music and color have a lot of things in common. Like there's tone, harmony and scale and they share their own vocabulary. But they are also very emotional… It's not just about thinking, it's more about feeling."



Barbara Romain in her Los Angeles studio, adding stenciled imagery to *The 5 Hindrances*. © Estate of Barbara Romain.

"The inspiration for my paintings is often derived from audio sources, particularly musical compositions. What I was seeing was very distorted. What I was hearing became very important for me. ***I am now inspired less by what I see, and more by what I hear, remember, and imagine."***

"Elements of landscape and nature combine with urban graffiti, pop icons, pictographs, hieroglyphics and other ancient language texts in these often large color field acrylic paintings."

"I would put up a big canvas and I would listen to a song over and over again. With the color, I would follow with a color. I would make a layer with the drum and then I would make a layer with the guitar and on top would be the lyrics usually. I call these paintings my visual music."

"My paints have braille labels on them so I can tell the difference between a red and blue – but there might be six different kinds of reds and I can't always tell exactly what it is. In a way I guess it's a blessing. Often I do make a mistake like 'oh that's a blue line because I didn't see the right color.' But I let it happen and I think it makes it interesting – it kind of makes it alive."

"In many of my paintings I use text as a 'weaving of words,' creating a complex, layered image. These layered images often require visual 'digging' by the viewer to unearth, and texts and meanings may not all be immediately apparent. ***The viewer is invited to traverse the canvas and create his/her own poetry."***

WHY BARBARA ROMAIN NOW

Barbara Romain's work is arriving at a moment that can finally describe it without reducing it.

For years, the easiest frame was disability: a legally blind painter who continued to paint. It was true and insufficient.

Romain's practice sits instead at a convergence the contemporary art world increasingly knows how to recognize: text and image, sound and gesture, disability and alternate perception, feminist performance, public and participatory art, pedagogy, politics, improvisation and the unruly cultural ecology of Los Angeles.

She had been working inside those intersections for decades.

The discontinuities matter. Romain's career does not offer the reassuring progression toward a single mature style that art history often prefers. As her sight changed, the terms of making changed with it. Figuration gave way to memory, symbol, language, sound, improvisation and increasingly physical ways of constructing an image. What can initially look like several different artists is, in fact, the record of one artist repeatedly renegotiating what seeing—and therefore painting—could mean.

But vision loss is only one part of that story.

Before blindness, Romain was already drawn toward collision: painting and poetry, sacred and vulgar, female experience and public language, jazz and gesture, popular culture and art history. In performance she tested the authority of socially policed words and bodies. In Art Options she and Mira-Lani Bernard built a pedagogy around what they called the "natural brilliance of outsiders." In Speaking Volumes: Transforming Hate, pages of racist and antisemitic literature remained visible inside paintings that refused to give those words the final say.

Again and again, Romain encountered an imposed meaning and asked what else it could become.

That question eventually extended to seeing itself.

Her adaptations—working close, working large, using stencils, relying on memory, drawing to music, allowing accidents to remain—were not simply methods for compensating for lost vision. They became ways of making paintings she would not otherwise have made. By 2001, Braille had entered the work as another form of language. In 2013, INTO THE LIGHT carried that investigation to architectural scale.

This is not a story about an artist triumphing over disability.

Nor is it a story about an overlooked artist whom an Estate now needs to declare important.

It is an invitation to look again.

Because when Barbara Romain's paintings, performances, public work, teaching and own words are placed back beside one another, something becomes visible that the fragmented record obscured: the work changed radically. The mind behind it did not.

SELECT CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

EXHIBITIONS + SHOWS

HOLTER MUSEUM OF ART · SPEAKING VOLUMES: TRANSFORMING HATE · 2008-2026.
Dialogue: Peace and *Dialogue: Star*, thirty-two showings across thirty-one venues, eighteen years and continuing– within a national project that included Faith Ringgold, Nick Cave and Jaune Quick-to-See Smith.

REMEMBER: AN AIDS MEMORIAL RETROSPECTIVE · OCCCA · 2018.
Barbara's text-driven paintings appeared with Alexandria Allan and Kurt Weston; featured in A&U Magazine.

VULVACULAR · CERES GALLERY · NEW YORK · 2017.
A feminist exhibition celebrating the power and beauty of the vulva.

de YOUNG MUSEUM · SAN FRANCISCO · 2009-2015
Art Slam appearances from 2009 through 2015.

ART BLIND · COLOGNE · 2013.
Sole U.S. artist among sixteen artists from nine nations; presented "Believing is Seeing" and led a workshop at the Kunsthochschule für Medien Köln.

JOHN F. KENNEDY CENTER · WASH., D.C. · 2008.
Hard Rain selected for VSA arts' juried Derivative Composition exhibition at the Terrace Gallery.

PHILADELPHIA MUSEUM OF ART · 2004.
Art Beyond Sight; part of a 2004 national exhibition run that also included Union Station and the Washburn Gallery in Washington, D.C., and the San Francisco Arts Commission's City Hall Gallery;

aka GINGER SVERLO · HOLLYWOOD · 1991.
Gray Pony's nude, comic, confrontational feminist performance became part of the national censorship conversation and led to a Fox television panel.

ON SCREEN / IN PRINT

CAN YOU SEE ME? · 2014, Linda Janakos documentary on Barbara Romain; Beyond Baroque screening.

SEVENTEEN MAGAZINE · 2009, "Rock On," Prom Issue

STARTING OVER · 2005-2006, NBC.

FALLING DOWN · 1992, Warner Bros. mural shot,

thirtysomething · 1988, ABC-TV gallery shot.

AWARDS + HONORS

THREE SPECIAL RECOGNITION MERIT AWARDS · 2009-2010 – Upstream People Gallery, international juried Exhibition 'Color: Bold/Subtle' approximately 300 entries, 61 artists selected. Juror Laurence Bradshaw specifically praised *Bad Eye on the Good Foot*, *What Comes After Black?*, and *Color Haikus*.

OUTSTANDING ARTIST · 2012 – Judi Jasek Award for Geometry, Passionate Focus / The Art Club of Chicago, 2012.

VSA TEACHING ARTIST FELLOWSHIP · 2006-2007 – inaugural program, Kennedy Center affiliate, 2006-07; a 2008 VSA arts reference letter identifies Barbara as one of five distinguished recipients.

OUTSTANDING TEACHER OF THE YEAR · 2007 – Columbia College Hollywood.

ARTIST IN RESIDENCE · 2005-2007 + 2006-2007 – City of Los Angeles Department of Cultural Affairs.

ARTIST IN RESIDENCE · 1998-2001 – California Arts Council, three consecutive years.

FIRST PRIZE · 2003 – Walter Knott Annual Art Award for Confronting Orange.

FIRST PRIZE · 1998 – Artists Beyond Disability, National Juried Exhibit, 1998.



Colette DeBarros, photograph for *Seventeen* magazine, Prom Issue, 2009. Background artworks: Barbara Romain, *Thomas Guide* and *Hot Flash in Echo Park*.

THE DOORS OPEN

In February 2027, Barbara Romain's Los Angeles home and modified studio will open to the public for the first time.

For more than forty years, Barbara exhibited across the United States and internationally. But there is another Barbara almost no one has seen.

Her paints never left the basement studio.

Many of her artworks and ceramics have never been seen in person by the public—not in a gallery, not in a museum, not once.

On Tuesday, February 9, 2027, from 4 pm to 7pm, Barbara's family will open her Los Angeles home and modified studio where she lived and worked, bringing roughly 45 works—including a selection of her ceramics—into view. The house has been remodeled since Barbara's death to honor the life and work that unfolded there. For her annual celebration-of-life week, it will become a gallery. The 4 pm to 5 pm hour will be private and for curators and press, then 5 pm to 7 pm will be open to the public.

The opening follows more than two years spent living with Barbara's archive: cataloguing more than 400 paintings and 100 ceramics, rebuilding an exhibition record stretching from 1986 to 2026 posthumously, reading papers she had stored away, listening to recordings and gradually reconnecting works with the exhibitions, collaborators, and stories around them.

The road to Los Angeles begins in Santa Barbara.

Beginning in November 2026, Barbara's family plans to features a selection of Barbara's work at the city's local First Thursday's ArtWalk, in a gallery setting.

SANTA BARBARA FIRST THURSDAYS

November 5 · December 3, 2026

Location TBD



SELECTED PRESS

"Barbara Romain is significant. Her canvases belong in the company of contemporary greats… Romain's work stays with you. Its brilliance is in making the viewer feel the immediacy of being right there in the moment with the painting. It is this very offerance of vitality that makes one want to see more. Much more."

Rachael Steele, "Barbara Romain – Depth Perception," Newsletter on the Arts, Fall 2003
Published by Diana Zlotnick



Barbara Romain, © Estate

KUNSTHOCHSCHULE FÜR MEDIEN KÖLN · 2013 The German academy's own text on her ART BLIND workshop: she "gives insight into her work and into her own way of making, which knows how to use her own visual resources in a highly creative way. In doing so she shows what untapped possibilities visual art has beyond mere seeing and the sharp gaze" – and can "offer sighted artists new stimulus." Sixteen artists from nine nations; she was the only American. Patron: Prof. Anthony Cragg, Rector of the Düsseldorf Art Academy.	**LOS ANGELES TIMES · 1990–1995** Times art critic Nancy Kapitanoff on Herstory and History: *"One can try to pick out individual words … and succeed, but that would only suggest part of the story. The cacophony of words in these life-size images creates a frenzied aura that communicates the larger picture here."* Curator Scott Canty, standing before the same painting: *"I feel like I'm in the midst of the busiest city with lights and neon, and everyone wants your attention." Aubry's 1993 framing: "Painter and performer Barbara Romain believes people have a common cultural ground that frequently goes unexplored: mythology."*
BILL MOHR · 2014 In The Resilient Visions of Barbara Romain, poet and literary historian Bill Mohr described an artist who *"faced an unexpected challenge to her poetics as a painter at the mid-point of her career"* and, *"refusing to be daunted by an eye disease that has eviscerated her eyesight,"* continued *"to produce a vigorous and intriguing body of work."*	**UPSTREAM GALLERY · 2009** Juror Laurence Bradshaw, Professor of Art at the University of Nebraska, awarded her three Special Recognition Merit Awards: Bad Eye on the Good Foot "brings an abundance of images into a fine visual collection"; What Comes After Black? "another excellent field work using text"; Color Haikus "terrific in the eight square panels of strong coloration and text treatments."
NEW HAVEN REGISTER · 2006 Reviewing Texture, a 22-artist show she otherwise found wanting, Judy Birke singled out Tower of Babel: "text as the physical element that becomes the image, the random phrases from different languages that make up the painted tower conveying a primitive energy and rawness."	**NEWSLETTER ON THE ARTS · 2003** Rachel Steele placed Barbara in the text-in-painting tradition running from Dada and Cubism through Stuart Davis to Wallace Berman, Ed Ruscha and Mark Tansey: " *"outstanding and memorable"* · *"a vibrant energy"* · *"a mysterious narrative lore that paints evocative images without the aid of figuration"* · "There is an epic quality to Romain's work… a lovely visual cacophony of (un)spoken word."

SELECTED PRESS + MEDIA

In The Space / Pasadena Media – 2021 | A BOOK OF Barbara Romain Feature – 2019 | A&U Magazine – 2018 | KUNC Public Radio – 2017 | Can You See Me? – 2014 | ABC 7 Chicago / WLS-TV – 2012 | Seventeen Magazine – 2009 | Scene / Braille Institute – 2007 | New Haven Register – 2006 | Newsletter on the Arts – 2003, 1989 | Los Angeles Times – 1995, 1994, 1993, 1990

WHAT BARBARA LEFT US

Barbara left us more than paintings.

When she died in 2024, she left hundreds of works alongside decades of photographs, correspondence, artist statements, performance materials, exhibition records, teaching documents, recordings, old digital files, press clippings—and stories scattered among the people who knew her.

At first, the task seemed straightforward: care for the paintings.

Then we started opening boxes.

One exhibition led to another. A name in an old program led to someone Barbara had performed with thirty years earlier. A photograph corrected a date. A cassette held her voice. Paintings we knew turned out to have traveled farther than we realized. Others appeared in photographs of exhibitions whose histories had nearly disappeared.

What began as caring for Barbara's work became the much stranger and more wonderful process of discovering the full shape of the life around it.

We are cataloguing the paintings and ceramics, digitizing her papers, rebuilding exhibition histories, reconnecting with collaborators and collectors, and following the trails Barbara left behind—sometimes deliberately, sometimes accidentally.

We don't want to turn her into a cleaner artist than she was.

We don't want to make the contradictions disappear.

We want people to encounter her.

If Barbara's work, life or archive connects with something you are researching, writing, exhibiting or thinking about, we would genuinely like to hear from you.

THE ESTATE OF BARBARA ROMAIN

Press · Exhibitions · Research · Reproduction

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www.barbararomain.com

PRESS / CURATORIAL INQUIRIES

High-resolution artwork photography, archival images, complete CV, exhibition history, interview transcripts and additional research materials are available on our website and through the Estate.